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ABSTRACT

This paper defines the Regular Education Initiative (REI) as encouraging both regular and special education personnel to work together more effectively to provide the best education possible for all children, by adapting the regular education environment to better accommodate the student's needs. The paper discusses the results of a statewide effort to implement the REI in Illinois. It presents a conceptual model which outlines effective principles and practices found to be successful in implementing the REI at the local school level. Each aspect of the framework is discussed with specific suggestions for successful implementation. The model calls for a commitment to change, a school-wide approach, a team concept, a network of services/resources, planning/communication, skills in effective practices, staff development, evaluation/feedback, and focus on individual students. The paper concludes that by observing and following these principles, schools can significantly increase their opportunities for success, and the Regular Education Initiative will evolve from promise into reality. (Contains 26 references.) (JDD)

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ED 370 327

# THE REGULAR EDUCATION INITIATIVE: A BLUEPRINT FOR SUCCESS

## A Description of a Statewide Implementation Project in Illinois

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## ABSTRACT

Because of the ineffectiveness of pull-out, or resource, programs, there has been a great deal of focus in recent years on what has come to be known as the Regular Education Initiative (REI). The REI is defined in this paper as *encouraging both regular and special education personnel to work together more effectively to provide the best education psosible for all all children.* Rather than remove the student with disabilities from the regular calssroom, the REI emphasizes adapting the regular education environment to better accommodate the student's needs.

This paper discusses the results of a statewide effort to implement the Regular Education Initiative in the state of Illinois. It presents a conceptual model which outlines effective principles and practices found to be successful in implementing the REI at the local school level. Each aspect of the framework is discussed in detail with specific suggestions for successful implementation provided.

## THE REGULAR EDUCATION INITIATIVE: A BLUEPRINT FOR SUCCESS

Few issues in recent years have stimulated as much debate among special educators as the Regular Education Initiative. Since its official entrance into the professional literature (Will, 1986) the REI has been a confusing and controversial topic of discussion among professionals (Wang, Reynolds and Walberg, 1986; Hallahan, Keller, McKinney, Lloyd, and Bryan, 1988; Lloyd, Crowley, Kohler, and Strain, 1988; McKinney and Holcutt, 1988; Chalfant, 1987; Reynolds, Wang, and Walberg, 1987; Slavin, 1990). Kauffman, Gerber, and Semmel (1988) observed that, while there are many statements made by advocates of the REI with which most educators would agree, there have been many others that are arguable. However, few would argue that over the last several years the REI has emerged as an alternative to the traditional method of educating students with disabilities in separate classrooms.

Much of the disagreement and confusion over the Regular Education Initiative has centered around its definition, with various professionals, state education agencies, and school districts all defining the REI in different ways. An operational definition developed in the state of Illinois describes the Regular Education Initiative as a concept which focuses on encouraging special education and standard curriculum personnel to work together to provide the best education possible for all children.

The REI focuses on providing for the needs of all children within the regular classroom environment. However, it goes must deeper than that because the concept of the REI is based on a fundamental change in the way we have viewed education, and special education in particular, over the last 15-20 years.

Traditionally, when a student is suspected of having a disability the focus has been on establishing the eligibility for special education services and then removing the student from the regular classroom for special help. The Regular Education Initiative focuses on changing the way the school functions in order to meet the needs of that student. In other words, rather than move the student we look at adapting and modifying the teaching process to better serve the student.

There are several reasons why this is desirable. There is a substantial amount of research indicating that the traditional pull-out model of special education is not a very effective method of serving many students with disabilities (Wang, Reynolds, and Walberg, 1986; Bilkin and Zollers, 1986; Reynolds and Lakin, 1988; Stainback and Stainback, 1984). In addition, the stigmatizing effects of segregating students from their same-age peers can often result in problems with self-esteem and social skills and personal interaction (Guralnick, 1984; Bryan and Sherman, 1980; Gresham and Reschly, 1988; Bilkin and Zollers, 1986; Johnson and Johnson, 1981). A benefit to working with all students in the regular classroom is that resources can be used more effectively and with greater flexibility (Stainback and Stainback, 1984; Lilly, 1986). And, finally, there is information which strongly suggests that keeping students with disabilities in the regular classroom also has many benefits for those students without disabilities (Brinker & Thorpe, 1986; Guralnick and Groom, 1988; Anitia & Kreimeyer, 1992).

**A Framework for Implementation**

The state of Illinois, over the last three years, has developed a statewide implementation plan for the Regular Education Initiative. Supported by a $1.2 million appropriation from the state legislature, a number of projects and

activities have been designed and tested in the state to determine the most effective process for implementing the Regular Education Initiative at the local school building level. Based upon information collected during this process a number of principles have emerged as important for effectively operationalizing the concept of the REI. These principles, illustrated in Figure One, provide a framework for successfully implementing the Regular Education Initiative. While not intended to be exhaustive, the principles discussed below should assist in focusing and framing activities designed to implement the REI concept.

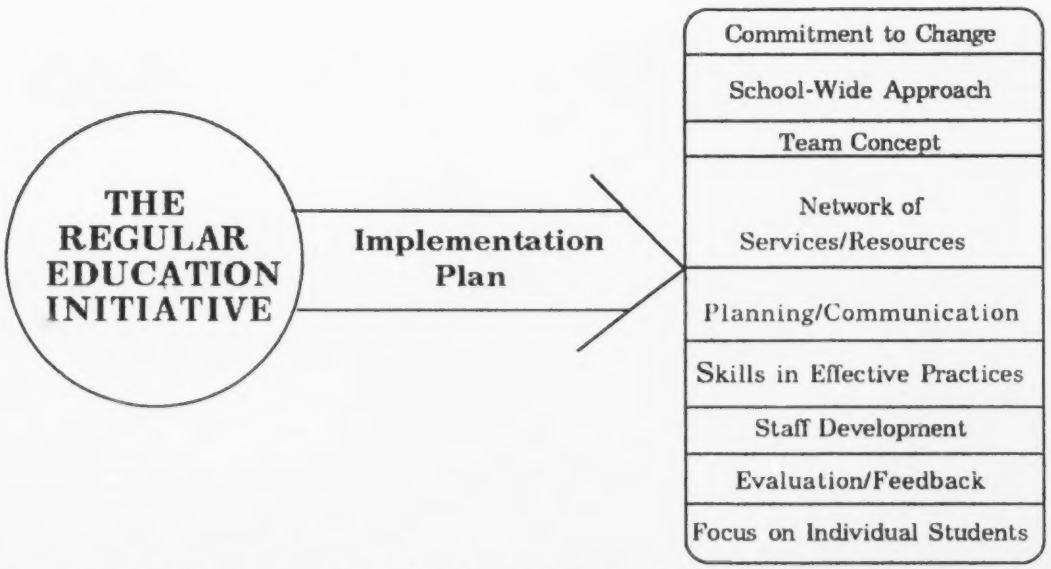


*Figure One: A Framework for Implementing the Regular Education Initiative*

**Commitment to Change**

In order for the Regular Education Initiative to be successfully implemented in a school, there must first be a commitment to change. School staff will need to change their perceptions, perspectives and expectations regarding the educational process. As Schumaker and Deshler (1988) noted, changes in the name of the REI are likely to fail if implementation is forced upon

schools through administrative mandate. Unfortunately, as several writers have pointed out (Doyle, 1992: Futrell, 1989; Fullan, 1992), the majority of attempts at reforming education are undertaken without any consideration for the principles of organizational change. Schumaker and Deshler (1988) stressed the importance of making changes in how services are provided to students with disabilities in light of the realities of the educational change process.

When attempting to implement the Regular Education Initiative in a school it is extemely important to observe the basic principles of the educational change process (Fullan, 1992; Miles, Louis, Rosenblum, Cipollone, and Farrar, 1986). First, changes that are being considered should be reviewed, modified, and adopted by everyone participating in the change. Organizations tend to change only to the degree that individual members value the proposed change and agree to embrace its key features.

Second, there are unique interpretations and meanings attached to educational change from school to school and from professional to professional. Individualizing the change to accommodate specific settings and interpretations is important. Third, if an educational change is to be institutionalized there must be the necessary administrative and other support networks and resources provided to insure that staff can acquire the skills needed in their new roles (Schumaker and Deshler, 1988).

And, fourth, it must be remembered that successful change takes time. Change occurs developmentally, and realistic timelines must be set to avoid frustration and disillusionment. An understanding of these elements of the change process has been a key feature of those schools that have been successful

in implementing the Regular Education Initiative.

**A School-Wide Approach**

In order for the Regular Education Initiative to realize its potential it must, ultimately, be implemented on a school-wide basis. Since the REI is actually a change process, rather than a program, its adoption must permeate the entire school staff so that everyone shares its philosophy and objectives. Schools can vary greatly in their commitment to and acceptance of change. As a result, some schools may wish to go slowly with the REI, putting it into place one component at time, or focusing on one teacher or grade level at a time. Other schools may be ready to proceed at a much faster rate. However, the focus, from the beginning, should be on eventual school-wide implementation.

**Team Concept**

At the very core of the REI is the concept of the team approach to the educational process. The intent of the Regular Education Initiative is to shift the emphasis for educating students with disabilities from a segregated approach to an integrated approach. Rather than focusing on labels and programs, the REI focuses on integrating the student's total educational program in order to meet his/her needs more appropriately. In order to do this it is essential that school staff work successfully as team members. Our experience has indicated that an approach to the REI that involves only one member or segment of the school community is not very successful.

The involvement of all aspects of the school community should form the foundation for all Regular Education Initiative activities including training and staff development, planning and communication, and on-going implementation.

Schools desiring to incorporate the REI concept should consider putting together teams consisting of regular and special education teachers, administrators, and regular/special education support staff. These teams should then work and participate together in the planning, staff development, and implementation aspects of the REI within the school.

**Network of Services and Resources**

The Regular Education Initiative involves the flexible, creative integration of services and resources to meet the needs of students with disabilities in the regular classroom. For this to work it is important that the school have a network of services and resources in place. Schools should determine, as part of the planning process, what services and resources need to be available and accessible in order for the Regular Education Initiative to be implemented effectively. A survey should be completed to determine the services and resources that are currently available and those that are not, and activities should be implemented to develop, obtain, and access the additional resources and services.

Schools will differ somewhat, of course, in terms of the services and resources needed, and those that are available. In some cases, it may not be possible to obtain all of the necessary resources. In those instances, the teams planning for the REI should address other options and alternatives. The important point is that a careful and prior consideration of resources and services is an essential component of the REI concept.

**Planning and Communication**

Another principle of the Regular Education Initiative is planning and ongoing communication. This principle also builds upon the principle of the

team approach. A mistake made by many schools in attempting to implement the REI is the absence, or lack, of adequate planning for implementation and adequate communication during implementation. Planning and communication are important components of the change process, and time must be set aside to allow staff members to carefully discuss and plan for the successful implementation of the REI within the school.

Likewise, it is essential during implementation to establish a system to facilitate effective and ongoing communication among those involved in the process. This communication system should include formal as well as informal avenues. It should also be comprehensive, allowing for problem-solving for school-wide barriers as well as for problems involving individual students.

**Knowledge and Skills in Effective Practices**

One interesting and effective feature of the Regular Education Initiative is that there is no one set of programs or practices that are needed or used in all schools and in all situations. The REI is very much an individualized concept that can and must be tailored and customized to meet local and individual needs. It is also a dynamic concept and the types of practices, techniques, methods, and skills needed will change frequently within each school and within each classroom. This has two implications for school staff. The first ties in with the previous principle because it is important that, through ongoing communication, the need for different practices, methods and skills are identified as quickly as possible.

The second implication relates to the principle of staff development because, once the need for different methods and skills are identified, it is

necessary to insure that staff members are appropriately trained in their use. Many effective practices have been developed and proven to be successful in educating students with disabilities in the regular classroom. Those practices are useful in some situations and are not appropriate in other situations. Nor is the list of effective practices exhaustive. New practices are being developed continually that are proving to be effective. It is important that staff members involved in implementing the REI be given access to any practice that might prove useful to them.

**Staff Development**

Many writers have noted the value of effective and ongoing staff development as an essential element of the change process. For the Regular Education Initiative to be effectively implemented, provision must be made for appropriate training and development activities during both the design and the implementation stages. The staff development program must be comprehensive, flexible, and dynamic. It must be flexible enough to provide for training in such diverse areas as the change process, planning and communication, and effective practices. It must also be comprehensive and not be confined to one-dimensional learning. It should provide for awareness and understanding, but, more importantly, it should lead to the acquisition and infusion of necessary skills into staff members' daily professional practices.

The elements of flexibility and dynamics require that staff development be provided in a number of formats and delivery models as required by staff members. And finally, staff development for the REI must have the ability to adapt and change as the needs and requirements of the school and individual

situations change.

**Evaluation and Feedback**

This is one component that is often omitted in many REI implementation programs. The Regular Education Initiative is valuable only to the extent that it benefits students, therefore, an essential principle of the REI implementation process should be a system for evaluating and determining its effectiveness. The information obtained should then be used to modify and adapt the implementation process, develop staff development programs, and modify communication and planning systems. Many times programs are put into place in schools and then left to work on their own without the continuous monitoring, evaluation and feedback necessary to insure long-term effectiveness and success. This evalution system should include formal as well as informal methods and should be both formative and summative.

**Focus on Individual Student**

It is sometimes easy to become so caught up in implementing an idea, concept, or program that the needs of individual students are forgotten or obscured. An important principle that should be built into the implementation of the Regular Education Initiative is a focus on individual student needs as identified and reflected in the IEP. The Regular Education Initiative is simply a means for educating students with disabilities more effectively. The means should not become an end within itself. In this regard this principle ties in closely with the previous one. It is important to evaluate wither or not the REI is appropriately meeting the needs of individual students with disabilities. The school must not sacrifice those needs for any kind of model or program. If a

student with disabilities is not having his/her needs met through the REI concept, then the school should re-examine the way services are being provided to that student.

## Conclusion

There are currently many winds of change that promise to dramatically alter the special education landscape. The Regular Education Initiative is one issue whose merits have been debated and discussed at length. However, the question of whether or not it will be done and how long it will be with us has been settled with a fair amount of certainty. It is a concept, a direction, that is here to stay. The question now remains, "How successful will we be in implementing it?" By observing and following these nine principles, schools can significantly increase their opportunities for success, and the Regular Education Initiative will evolve from promise into reality.

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